

## **Schools curriculum deal leaves some bitter**

Parent files request for a stay with state board

Wednesday, June 16, 2010

by Marcus Moore | Staff Writer

[http://www.gazette.net/stories/06162010/montnew182334\\_32548.php](http://www.gazette.net/stories/06162010/montnew182334_32548.php)

A county parent is asking the state school board to stop, at least temporarily, a business deal between the county school system and an educational publishing company as two school board members continue to question the agreement.

On Monday, outspoken schools critic Janis Z. Sartucci filed a request for a stay with the state board to give Montgomery County residents more time to question the details of the contract, approved by the county school board last week, under which school officials and the Pearson education company will craft an integrated curriculum.

The curriculum, which will be developed over two years, fuses reading and math with science, social studies, art, music and physical education, according to Pearson information.

School board members Laura V. Berthiaume and Michael A. Durso questioned why the contract had to be approved so quickly. The terms of the contract were finalized June 6; the board voted on the contract during its June 8 meeting in Rockville.

"I'm not asking for anything unusual," Sartucci said Tuesday. "You can only ask [for a stay], and that's all I did was ask. It's worth asking because it's a major change to the school system's elementary school curriculum."

In response, Brian K. Edwards, chief of staff to Superintendent Jerry D. Weast, called Sartucci's stay request a "frivolous legal action."

"We're actually trying to save taxpayers money and help the children of Montgomery County with this innovative partnership," Edwards wrote in an e-mail to The Gazette. "Instead, her personal animus toward the school system will require us to spend precious resources responding to her baseless claims."

The county school board voted 6-2 to approve the contract. Berthiaume (Dist. 2) of Rockville and Durso (Dist. 5) of Silver Spring voted against the contract.

Under the deal, Pearson will pay the school system \$4.5 million over three years to hire 12 instructional specialists to develop the curriculum, Edwards said.

Prior to its partnership with Pearson, the school system had plans to develop an integrated curriculum over the next five years. Pearson's investment allows the school system to develop the curriculum in two years, Edwards said.

The deal also allows Pearson to sell the curriculum nationwide once it's developed, with the county school system getting 2.5 percent in royalties, according to the contract.

Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, a member of the County Council's Education Committee, said he is still reviewing the contract and had no comment.

Council members Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown and Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring — the other members of the education committee — did not return calls by press time.

On Monday, Berthiaume questioned whether the school system's deal blurs the line between public education and business.

"I've never seen an instance of a government entity on any level basically agreeing to become a contractor to a private company," she said.

Berthiaume said she received a paper copy of the contract on June 7, but couldn't review it until the afternoon because of a busy day at work. Board members agreed to put the contract on the agenda for the following day.

"The board never took a vote to negotiate the contract with Pearson," Berthiaume said. "It was 'Hey, we got this awesome deal, and we're going to do this.'"

Board member Durso, a former principal at Springbrook High School in Silver Spring, also questioned why the contract had to be approved so quickly.

"I still don't see what the urgency was," Durso said. "I didn't think we had ample time to make a sound decision. We'll have to see if it's the success that some people think that it's going to be."

School board President Patricia B. O'Neill said that board members were told "months in advance" of the school system's plan to develop an integrated curriculum. Board members also were told of the Pearson contract negotiations in April and May, she said.

"The rest of the board felt comfortable in voting affirmatively on this," said O'Neill (Dist. 3) of Bethesda. "On any new thing, there are people in this community who will always say 'no.' They may not always be aware of every new contract, but if they want to have inside knowledge, maybe they ought to run for the Board of Education."

